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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [MARR](#) [MASS](#) [MCAP](#) [ENRG](#) [RS](#) [VE](#)
SUBJECT: RUSSIA SENDS BOMBERS TO VENEZUELA

REF: A. CARACAS 1269
[1](#)B. MOSCOW 2127

Classified By: Political M/C Alice G. Wells: Reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: On September 11 MFA officials announced that two Russian Blackjack bombers had landed in Venezuela. While the MFA focused its remarks on the regularity of long-range aviation (LRA) flights, MOD officials were more upbeat, arguing that these bomber flights proved the Russian Air Force could extend its reach all over the world and noting the bombers may take part in joint air force exercises. This came after the MFA announced Russia and Venezuela may participate in joint naval exercises. Putin appointed DPM Igor Sechin to head the Russian-Venezuelan Commission, most likely to give more prominence to energy in Russia's relations with Venezuela. Local experts argue that Russia-Venezuela political-military relationship has been developing for a number of years, with Venezuela purchasing about USD 4 billion in weapons from Russia. Events in the Caucasus have therefore only intensified an already-existing relationship. End Summary.

Tu-160s Fly To Venezuela

[1](#)2. (U) On September 11 MFA Spokesman Andrey Nesterenko announced that two unarmed Tu-160 Blackjack bombers completed a 13-hour flight to Venezuela's Libertador airfield (ref A). Nesterenko argued that Russian LRA flights take place on a regular basis, and that they are necessary to properly train pilots. He also stressed that these flights did not mean that Russia now has a military base in Venezuela.

[1](#)3. (U) Russian Strategic Aviation Commander Major General Pavel Androsov took a more celebratory tone, claiming that the flight of these planes proved the Russian Air Force could reach all corners of the globe. The pilots completed the mission, he said, without any problems. These flights, according to Androsov, provided the pilots with an opportunity to rehearse missions near the equator. On September 16, Air Force spokesperson Lieutenant Colonel Vladimir Drik announced that the bombers had successfully carried out a patrol mission along the South American coast.

[1](#)4. (U) Androsov said the Russian planes may hold joint air force exercises with Venezuela. He added that Russia would welcome aviation cooperation with other countries as well, and pointed out that Cuban airfields would also be suitable for landing Russian aircraft, although the GOR had no plans to fly bombers to Cuba. According to Drik, the bombers originally planned to return to Russia on September 15,

although this was postponed to September 19.

Joint Naval Exercises May Occur Soon

¶5. (U) The bomber flights come on the heels of Nesterenko's September 8 announcement that Russian naval ships would call on Venezuelan ports and that the two countries might hold joint naval exercises in the Caribbean Sea in November. He stressed that the agreement on the port visits was reached long before the conflict in the Caucasus broke out. "These exercises will not be targeted against any third party," he said. In all four Russian ships will travel to Venezuela, with a combined crew of 1,000. The ships include the flagship of Russia's North Fleet, the nuclear-powered cruiser "Peter the Great" as well as the large anti-submarine ship "Admiral Chabanenko."

GOR appoints Sechin To Head Russian-Venezuelan Commission

¶6. (SBU) On September 15, Interfax reported that Putin appointed Deputy Prime Minister Igor Sechin to replace Deputy Prime Minister Aleksandr Zhukov as head of the Russian-Venezuelan Commission. Some analysts interpret this to mean that Russia has decided to place more emphasis on the energy dimension in its relations with Venezuela. The press reported that on September 16 Sechin headed a delegation of representatives from economic-related ministries and large Russian companies to Venezuela to hold talks on bilateral cooperation in energy, financial, industry, transport, science, education, and agriculture sectors. Such talks have occurred in the past, and yielded little (ref B).

But To What End?

¶7. (C) Experts here argue that Russia has been drawing closer to Venezuela since the end of 2007, attempting with little subtlety to draw linkage between its Latin American diplomacy and the failure to reach agreement with the U.S. on CFE or missile defense (MD) plans in Poland and the Czech Republic. Ivan Safranchuk of the World Security Institute argued that as Russia became convinced the U.S. would go ahead with its MD plans, it sought to use Chavez to create a "mini-crisis" in the Caribbean, despite the personal dislike for the Venezuelan leader. This, combined with Russian feelings of encirclement brought on by NATO expansion, led the GOR to conclude that drawing closer to Chavez would make the U.S. feel similar "discomfort."

¶8. (C) The bottom line also drives Russia's relationship with Venezuela. Retired Major General and Deputy Director of the U.S.-Canada Institute Pavel Zolotarev pointed out that Russia-Venezuela military cooperation has been developing for several years. Venezuela has purchased over USD 4 billion in Russian weapons, including helicopters, 100,000 Kalashnikov rifles, and 24 Su-30 fighter-bombers. NATO ships in the Black Sea have simply motivated Russia to intensify an already-existing relationship, Zolotarev argued. Venezuela remains one of the few countries to give rhetorical support for Russian actions in Georgia, even if Chavez has refrained from official recognition of the two conflict territories.
BEYRLE